

# SecEd Guide to...



## What makes an outstanding lesson?

### Key content

- Practical guidance on how to make your teaching and lessons “outstanding” under the new Ofsted framework
- Chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw on what makes a good teacher and a good lesson
- An at-a-glance checklist for “outstanding” teaching and lessons
- The role of lesson observation and how this contributes to “outstanding” practice
- A case study of one school’s teacher-led, cross-departmental lesson observations

In association with

**ASCL** Association  
of School and  
College Leaders

# GUIDE TO... Outstanding Teaching

From this year, Ofsted is placing a greater focus on the quality of teaching as part of its inspection judgements. According to the 2012 Ofsted inspectors' evaluation schedule: "The most important role of teaching is to raise pupils' achievement. It is also important in promoting their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development."

It continues: "Teaching should be understood to include teachers' planning and implementing of learning activities across the whole curriculum, as well as marking, assessment and feedback. It comprises activities within and outside the classroom, such as support and intervention. The judgement on the quality of teaching must take account of evidence of pupils' learning and progress."

This will include evidence of setting challenging and differentiating tasks, delivering lessons at an appropriate pace, and the use of feedback and marking to ensure pupils understand their levels of progress and what the expectations are of them. Inspectors will no longer base their assessments on "snap-shots" of individual lessons but will look at practice and progress in the whole school over time.

Crucially, as of September, schools will no longer be able to gain an "outstanding" overall judgement unless the quality of teaching is deemed to be outstanding in most lessons.

## What is an outstanding lesson?

The Ofsted framework does not say explicitly what an outstanding lesson should be, but it does provide an indication of what inspectors will look for in outstanding teaching. The key points that will set apart an outstanding lesson from one that is good or satisfactory are as follows:

- Work should be pitched at a level that is achievable if individual pupils work hard and try their very best.
- Assessment data should be used to set tasks that are perfectly matched to the pupils' prior attainment.
- The use of resources, including the use of teaching assistants where applicable, should

promote rapid learning for pupils regardless of their aptitudes and needs.

- Pupils with specific learning needs should be supported at the appropriate time and level to optimise their learning.

## The observation of lessons will be just one aspect of how teaching is judged

- The tasks set in the lesson should enthuse pupils so that they persevere when faced with difficult problems and are keen to succeed and to learn more.
- Work must include opportunities for the development of pupils' skills in reading, writing, mathematics and ICT, as well as extending broader skills such as research and teamwork.
- The teacher demonstrates a high degree of subject knowledge throughout the lesson and can tease out pupils' understanding through appropriate questioning.
- Homework needs to be set and marking carried out frequently to provide pupils with clear guidance on where they are in their learning and how they can improve.

Jan Webber, the Association of School and College Leaders' inspections specialist, said that achieving an outstanding rating would now prove more difficult for schools.

She explained: "So far, among secondary schools, there have been only 15 outstanding judgements since the framework changed in January, and one of the reasons is because it has become so much harder to show outstanding teaching.

"The observation of lessons will be just one aspect of how teaching is judged. Inspectors will want to assess how progress is achieved over time by talking to pupils to find out how they found the lesson and what they got out of it.

"The idea is to build up a picture of what happens

in classrooms across the whole school when the inspectors are not there.”

When Ofsted inspectors feed back to the school on what they have observed, they will not be able to say that a particular lesson itself was outstanding, but that there were features within it that were, Ms Webber said. “The advantage is that this will benefit those teachers who do an excellent job, but who go to pieces during an inspection. However, this process is a lot more complicated than the one used previously and is arguably open to interpretation by inspectors. It is a recipe for inconsistency.”

Tony Thornley, an independent education consultant, has extrapolated from a number of documents and lesson observations that he has witnessed the qualities an outstanding lesson should contain. He has formulated these into a checklist to support teachers (see box, right).

He told *SecEd*: “The first thing about an outstanding lesson is that learning needs to be exceptionally good and progress needs to be good and sustained for all of the children. Planning needs to be very thorough and, in particular, teachers need to help pupils to have achieved by the end of the lesson. So it needs to be well-defined in their minds what the objective of the lesson is.”

He said a lesson was like a journey from one point to another, and it needed preparation and

**Under the new framework it will not be about a teacher’s performance on the day, but how typical the pupils’ learning experience is with a particular teacher over time**

the realisation that some steps taken may be small ones. He continued: “A classroom is not a homogenous environment and there will need to be some differentiation according to the needs of the pupils.

“Primary schools tend to be better at this and group children by ability, but it is rarely seen in

secondary classrooms. Teachers need to be able to ask open-ended questions which make demands of the learner and then to follow up with further questioning to establish whether or not they have understood.

“Much of this should be second nature to an experienced teacher. If the planning, preparation, differentiation and engaging tasks are all present in a lesson then classroom management should not be an issue as this naturally falls into place when the pupils are engaged.”

Feedback and marking were important, he said, because up-to-date feedback “shows that the teacher cares about what the students are doing and gives them a clear idea of what they need to do to get to the next level”.

“Inspectors will look at how typical the pupils’ learning experience is with a particular teacher over time. This will be hardest to prove with new, inexperienced teachers and those who have recently arrived at a school and who have had to start again in a new environment and with different pupils, whom they must get to know.”

Mr Thornley said one of the key aspects of a successful lesson rested in the relationship between the teacher and the class – an aspect of outstanding teaching that did not appear in any framework, but which needed to be borne in mind. “Where the relationship is one where the teacher dominates then you rarely get the right response from pupils,” he added.

Meanwhile, chief inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has said recently that teachers will be judged on their ability to help pupils learn and not on their entertainment value. He added that every teacher needs to develop a style of teaching with which they feel comfortable, and which was flexible enough to cope with the demands of the lesson.

He said: “A good lesson is about what works. A formulaic approach pushed out by a school or rigidly prescribed as part of the inspection process traps too many in a stultifying and stifling mould which does not demand their use of imaginative, initiative or common sense.”

He said teachers needed to be aware of when the mood of the lesson changes so they can alter their approach: “The worst lessons are those where a teacher ploughs through the plan irrespective of

how well, or how badly, the lesson is going. Ofsted won't require lesson plans when observing, but they will want to see a planned lesson."

It was important for teachers to adapt as the lesson went on, and to acknowledge that they did not have to know all the answers. The best teachers were happy to seek advice from others and to be

observed themselves, he said. They also understood the dynamics of the class and could dictate the pace of a lesson.

"A good teacher understands the maxim that nothing is taught unless it is learned and they are great at picking out the inattentive child to make sure they are keeping up," he added.

# How can you be outstanding?

## Pupils

- Rapid and sustained progress for almost all.
- An environment where students learn exceptionally well.
- High levels of engagement, interest, resilience, confidence, independence, courtesy, collaboration and co-operation.

## Assessment

- Assessment of prior learning is systematic and accurate.
- During lessons, understanding is checked systematically and effectively, anticipating interventions.
- Appropriate homework is set regularly to contribute to pupils' learning.
- Marking and feedback are high-quality and frequent so pupils know how to progress.

## Teaching

- Teachers have excellent knowledge and understanding of their subject.
- Teacher lesson-planning is astute.

- Time is used very well; tasks are challenging and match pupils' needs accurately.
- Activities are imaginative and well-judged to meet the content of the lesson.
- Expectations are consistently high of all pupils.
- Interventions are sharply focused and timely, and match individual needs accurately.
- Every opportunity is taken to develop reading, writing, communication and mathematics skills.

## Behaviour and safety

- Lessons proceed without interruption.
- Pupils make every effort to ensure that their classmates thrive and learn.
- There is an atmosphere of respect and dignity in the classroom.
- Behaviour management is systematic and consistently applied.
- Pupils understand unsafe situations and are highly aware of how to keep themselves and others safe.

*Checklist by education consultant Tony Thornley*

## Useful links and further resources

The Ofsted inspectors' evaluation schedule provides outline guidance and grade descriptors for the judgements that inspectors will report on under the new framework: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/evaluation-schedule-for-inspection-of-maintained-schools-and-academies-january-2012](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/evaluation-schedule-for-inspection-of-maintained-schools-and-academies-january-2012)

Ofsted's recent *Moving English Forward* report contains a useful section on the "myths" of what does and does not make a good lesson: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/moving-english-forward](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/moving-english-forward)

ASCL is producing a series of three DVDs on good lesson observation to help observers make accurate judgements. You can order these online: [www.ascl.org.uk/lessonobservations](http://www.ascl.org.uk/lessonobservations)

ASCL is hosting two conferences in October, in London and Manchester, on the latest Ofsted framework: [www.ascl.org.uk/events/conferences/One\\_day\\_conferences/contents](http://www.ascl.org.uk/events/conferences/One_day_conferences/contents)

# Lesson observation



**Brian Lightman, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, outlines the importance of lesson observation, as part of effective CPD, to achieve excellent practice in the classroom**

WHEN IT comes to Ofsted inspections it is important that the people in leadership positions, and the whole school, know what the quality of teaching is and that they have evidence for this.

They need to be able to demonstrate the strategies that should be in place in any areas of development and how this should inform the school's CPD programme.

One of the most crucial aspects of CPD for improving teacher quality is lesson observation. This has a number of different purposes, but it should never be used with a sinister motive.

Where it is carried out effectively, it is always done in a supportive and developmental context.

Where teachers can see each other at work and they can observe how different people operate, they invariably learn from each other's best practice and this helps them mutually to iron out any difficulties.

As an NQT many moons ago, I asked if I could watch a more experienced colleague in order to improve my classroom management skills.

I found that I learnt more in one hour of observation and the discussion afterwards than I could have done on any course, and have been convinced about the value of peer observation ever since.

It is not necessary for line managers or other senior managers to carry out all the observations. The less experienced teachers in the school can often benefit most from watching more experienced colleagues at work, from whom

they can gain some mentoring support on best practice and the techniques that work in the classroom.

Classroom observation is a very valuable tool in improving all teaching within a school, but at times I have been concerned about the opposition expressed about the practice in some quarters.

Inspection should never be punitive or threatening, and it is not about catching people out. What it is about is working together as professionals to support each other and raise standards of teaching.

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In areas where underperformance is identified, it will also serve to inform where additional support and challenge should be put in place and where to instigate capability procedures if absolutely necessary. It needs to be treated as a constructive process but it is also part of leadership and management.

We are pleased that the chief inspector of schools has been very clear that an outstanding lesson is not about jumping through hoops in order to satisfy inspectors and that inspectors will not be looking for a prescribed teaching style or mode of lesson.

However, we do have some concerns about how inspectors will interpret the guidelines. What the chief inspector needs to do now is to ensure that his inspectors are consistent in their judgements.

# Spreading best practice

## Case study: Lawrence Sheriff School

Lesson observation between colleagues plays a key role in CPD at Lawrence Sheriff School. Once or twice a year, teachers from different departments watch each other at work, and provide each other with feedback on strategies and methods that work and are effective.

This spreading of best practice has helped the secondary, based in Warwickshire, to go from strength to strength, with examination results improving annually and an outstanding Ofsted rating (including an outstanding grade for teaching and learning).

"We became involved in a project in conjunction with the National College for School Leadership some years ago that was intended to reduce variation in academic performance between different departments in the same schools," explained Dr Peter Kent, the headteacher. "About 10 years ago, Professor David Reynolds, the educationalist and academic, identified that this phenomenon within schools was actually a bigger problem than variation between schools. This obviously surprised a lot of people and it made us think about how we could make improvements in our own school."

One of the ideas developed at Lawrence Sheriff was giving staff from one department the opportunity to observe colleagues in a completely different subject area. "Until then, any lesson observation tended to be done within the same department," Dr Kent said.

"We saw it as an opportunity to see what colleagues were doing across the whole school and to give them informal feedback which was quite unlike what they might get from an Ofsted inspection."

Departments were divided into "triads", with colleagues from three departments linked together for observations. They would look at different aspects of teaching and classroom management, compare notes and strategies, and offer each other ideas about what worked best.

The impact has been palpable in the school: "There are a variety of ways in which these lesson observations have helped," Dr Kent continued.

"Crucially, they have raised the dialogue about teaching and learning and encouraged staff to reflect on their own practice by considering the practice of others. In some cases, good practice in one department has been adopted in another to excellent effect. Generally speaking this has proved to have far more impact than someone, like me or members of the senior leadership team, dictating to people from on high about what they should be doing. That kind of approach tends not to work very well.

"It is far better if they see a colleague at work because this has an impact over time as they gradually implement changes to their practice and try out what works. We don't lay down rules about how often lesson observations should take place – the triads themselves make those decisions – but on average each member of staff observes a colleague a couple of times a year."

Dr Kent said the triads were organised to include quite different disciplines so that, for example, the English department could observe how teachers of science carried out practical work. This could help English staff with the organisation and delivery of practical work in their own classrooms, such as oral classes, even though generally their subject might be more writing or book-driven.

"If you ally similar subjects too closely in a triad – for example by grouping together history and geography – then you run the risk of subjects mirroring each other. The idea is to look at how a completely different subject is taught," Dr Kent added.

"We have been doing this in one form or another for the last eight years. This is a very high-performing school and there is no doubt in my mind that this is all part of that success. Sharing professional practice has proved to be very powerful."

*This Guide To... has been produced by SecEd with support from the Association of School and College Leaders, the only professional association and trade union to speak exclusively for secondary school and college senior leaders. ASCL membership is now more than 17,000 and growing. Its members receive legal cover and support, an advice hotline, guidance and resource materials, updates on the latest education news and commercial discounts. Visit [www.ascl.org.uk](http://www.ascl.org.uk)*